

## Promising Practice: Dental Laboratory Technicians Schenectady County Community College Health Profession Opportunity Grant

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For many potential participants in Health Profession Opportunity Grants (HPOG) programs, funded by the Administration for Children and Families' Office of Family Assistance, a criminal past is an insurmountable barrier that prevents them from finding employment in the healthcare industry. Indeed, only certain occupations allow individuals with criminal backgrounds to work in healthcare. Dental Laboratory Technician (DLT), because of the absence of direct patient contact, is one such occupation. Having recognized this, Schenectady County Community College's HPOG program has begun offering DLT training to those individuals with criminal backgrounds, thereby enlarging the pool of potential program clients.

DLTs fabricate, alter, or repair dental devices and earn an average annual wage of \$35,590. The tasks performed by DLTs are generally similar to those of a manufacturing job and are best suited to students who possess a good ability to work with their hands and an aptitude for detail. At Schenectady County Community College, the DLT program introduces students to the basic techniques, materials, anatomy, and terminology that will enable them to fabricate a dental appliance (denture or partial) from beginning to end. This training includes dental lab safety, oral anatomy, tooth morphology, complete denture work, casts, and custom trays. The course runs about 10 weeks, starting with an emphasis in the classroom and gradually moving to full-time work in the lab. Currently, instructors train students using the 2005 Air Force Manual, as recommended by the National Board for Certification in Dental Laboratory Technology.

Schenectady's DLT training came about as the program leadership was seeking ways to offer more inclusive training. Project director Tiziana Rota says, "We were approached by a local dental lab owner asking about providing training in Dental Lab Tech (DLT). As we explored various options, we found that using our existing classrooms for the more academic aspect of the training, along with the use of his lab for the practical aspect of the course, would provide us with the right combination for success." The first course launched in July 2012, with about six HPOG students enrolled.

Having worked out some of the kinks following the initial experience, Schenectady's HPOG program is now ready to launch an additional DLT training in a different county. As in the case of the initial DLT program, Ms. Rota has partnered with a local manufacturer of dental materials and equipment, CMP Industries, to offer training in a state-of-the-art training lab. Additionally, the HPOG program is working with the New York State Department of Labor's Office of Apprenticeship to develop a competency-based apprenticeship, thus offering more opportunities beyond the life of the grant and its geographical limitations. The HPOG program also plans to offer more advanced DLT training in years 4 and 5 of the grant.

For other HPOG projects interested in launching DLT programs, Ms. Rota recommends that they first get in touch with dental lab facilities, as these will provide students with an optimal training environment. Ms. Rota also suggests learning what certifications are needed by local DLT employers so that programs may tailor their trainings.

## **HPOG Promising Practices: Mentoring for CNA Students**

### **Schenectady County Community College**

Schenectady County Community College (SCCC) has implemented a mentoring program for HPOG Certified Nurse Aide (CNA) students. The goal of this practice is to offer students an extra layer of support by delivering the practical skills training necessary to pass their certification exam and by providing role models to enhance students' ability to visualize themselves in the CNA role.

SCCC's HPOG program currently has three CNA mentors working on a contractual basis and rotating between training sites. These mentors are all licensed, experienced CNAs whose duties are to assist the Registered Nurses leading the simulation lab practice of clinical skills and to model the competencies and soft skills needed in the healthcare workplace. Mentors are also available for meeting with students outside of the classroom, where they can help students review class material, prepare for exams, or navigate the large amount of resources available from the HPOG program and its partners. Prior to the certification exam, mentors join students in the labs for "review days," ensuring that students are prepared for the test.

In addition to forming a bond with students, the mentors interact regularly with instructors and case managers. These relationships increase all parties' awareness of the students' barriers and progress and help program staff provide students with truly "wraparound" support.

HPOG project director Amy Goldfarb states that the most important factor in the success of Schenectady's mentor program is the personal qualities of the mentors themselves. They must be able to see themselves in the students and relate to the students' situations. Indeed, many of Schenectady's mentors come from backgrounds similar to those of the students, facilitating the process of forming mentor-student bonds. They also must have worked in the field and be able to communicate or make real their experience.

Goldfarb especially emphasizes the importance of the mentors' interpersonal skills and ability to inspire and believe in their students. Although many of these qualities are present in current or past HPOG students, Goldfarb cautions against hiring CNAs who have recently completed the program as the difficulties inherent in transitioning from student to mentor may prevent these new graduates from forming an appropriate and effective bond with the students.

Since its launch in late 2011, the CNA mentorship program has resulted in improved training program retention and completion rates, higher certification exam pass rates, and fewer students needing to retest for their certification.